

Education for Public Service in the History of the United States**Alexander Keyssar and Ernest R. May**

Education for public service in the United States has evolved as public service itself has evolved. Schooling intended to prepare men and women to serve in the public sector has necessarily reflected both prevailing beliefs about government and prevailing beliefs about teaching and learning. Not surprisingly, the education of Americans for public service has for the most part followed obsolescing principles and been aimed at preparing people to work in a fast-vanishing past. The utility of a chapter here on this history is to emphasize how hard it is and always has been to provide professional education for a future almost certain to be different from either present or past.

Without getting into the mucky debate about “American exceptionalism,” it can be noted that education for public service in the United States has differed from such education in most if not all other parts of the world. In continental Europe, Roman law created a tradition of intensive training in methods of discovering and applying administrative rules. Though the British is less developed a distinctive common law tradition, England and Scotland were influenced by Europe’s Roman past and by their need to transact business with European states. Hence, they, too, became accustomed to entrusting public business to experienced, long-service administrators who commanded the languages and knew the precedents of government. John Locke and Samuel Pepys are famous examples.¹

England, in fact, marched ahead of continental Europe in creating a formal civil service with associated educational requirements. By the 18th century, the English administrative service had become larded with appointees chiefly qualified by family connections. This bureaucracy was assigned partial blame (and rightly so) both for provoking the American war for independence and for losing the war once it had started. Scandals in India (still ruled by a chartered company) then led to creation of a formal school for training administrators. Regarded as a great success, the Indian civil service became a model for a domestic civil service, with the difference that the Oxbridge liberal arts curriculum was presumed to provide all the requisite preparation. As was argued by the historian, Thomas Babington Macaulay, who had a large hand in shaping the British civil service: “early superiority in literature and science generally indicates the existence of some qualities which are securities against vice – industry, self-denial, a taste for pleasures not sensual, a laudable desire of honorable distinction, a still more laudable desire to obtain the approbation of friends and relations.” As Herman Finer contends in his classic study of the British civil service, the creation of an administrative elite owed much to the fact that Britain was governed at Westminster by aristocrats and members of the upper middle class who thought of themselves as secure in ownership of the home islands and empire and simply wanted their property to be well-managed.²

The United States, in contrast to continental Europe and the United Kingdom, had not only no tradition of service to the State but active abhorrence of the idea of the State. The Americans of 1776 had rebelled against the British State in all its forms – not only the monarchy in London but every governor and appointed council in every colony.

Though they mostly used the term “state” for the new entities they created, they insisted that their governments were to be agents of their citizenry and nothing more.

The Founding Fathers believed that education for public service consisted essentially in study of past experience, especially that of the ancient world and modern Britain. While historians quarrel about the extent to which the founders relied on Greek and Roman classics themselves or on summations handed down by British Whigs and Commonwealthmen, no one who has leafed through records of the Continental Congress, the Constitutional Convention, or the pamphlet war preceding ratification can take issue with the conclusion in Carl Richards’ *The Founders and the Classics* that “the most remarkable aspect of the debates ... was not the Federalists’ narrow victory over the Antifederalists, but the classicists’ rout of the anticlassicists.”³ Victory commonly went to the orator or pamphleteer with the largest arsenal of classical citations or quotations.

This concept of the education for public service did not long survive. Gordon Wood argues in *The Creation of the American Republic* and later works that, immediately after ratification of the Constitution, there was a popular reaction against the elitist classicism prevailing in the Federalist-Antifederalist debates. Ratification, Wood asserts, marked the “end of classical politics.” Other historians see the shift as occurring later, perhaps even after the War of 1812.⁴ But there can be no question that, by the time of Andrew Jackson, the idea that classical education provided special fitness for public service had fallen into total disrepute. Indeed, the idea of any linkage between education and employment came into question, with the ministry the best barometer. Whereas the

churches of colonial and early national America had had learned clergy (comparatively speaking), the evangelical churches that mushroomed in 19th century America set no such requirement.⁵

At the time when Britain's governing classes decided that their properties needed educated managers, the U.S. was becoming the world example of "democracy" – a nation (or collection of nations) governed by a mass electorate. The ruling principle was President Andrew Jackson's that "the duties of all public officers are, or at least admit of being made, so plain and simple that men of intelligence may readily qualify themselves for their performance." One corollary was the famous maxim of Senator (later Secretary of State) William Learned Marcy of New York that, after an election, "to the victor belongs the spoils of the enemy." A more high-minded corollary was that amplified in Frederick Grimke's book of 1848, *The Nature and Tendency of Free Institutions*: "it is of the greatest importance, in a country where the electoral franchise is extensively enjoyed, that as large a number of citizens as practicable should be initiated into the mode of conducting public affairs, and there is no way by which this can be so well effected as by a rotation in office."⁶

These Jacksonian notions even led to attacks on the one national institution that had already been erected to provide education for a branch of public service: the academy to train army officers at West Point. Established in 1802, the academy satisfied both Federalists, who thought the nation should have a professional army, and President Thomas Jefferson, who was interested primarily in having a school for engineers.

Jacksonians criticized the academy, arguing that the nation needed only citizen soldiers, but those attacks were rebuffed, and in the late 1840s, a naval academy was added to provide on land some of the professional training that had long been given at sea to midshipman officer candidates.⁷

Alexis de Tocqueville, whose *Democracy in America* was based on observations made during the Jackson era, commented with wonderment on the absence in America of even the most basic level of formal governmental administration. “The public administration is, so to speak, oral and traditional . . . ,” wrote Tocqueville,

“no one cares for what occurred before his time: no methodical system is pursued, no archives are formed, and no documents are brought together when it would be very easy to do so. Where they exist, little store is set upon them. I have among my papers several original public documents which were given to me in the public offices in answer to some of my inquiries. In America society seems to live from hand to mouth, like an army in the field. Nevertheless, the art of administration is undoubtedly a science, and no science can be improved if the discoveries and observations of successive generations are not connected together in the order in which they occur. One man in the short space of his life remarks a fact, another conceives an idea; the former invents a means of execution, the latter reduces a truth to a formula; and mankind gathers the fruits of individual experience But the persons who conduct the administration in America can seldom afford any instruction to one another; and when they assume the direction

of society, they simply possess those attainments which are widely disseminated in the community, and no knowledge peculiar to themselves. Democracy ... is therefore prejudicial to the art of government.”⁸

Tocqueville saw lawyers as America’s governing class. “If I were asked where I place the American aristocracy,” he wrote, “I should reply without hesitation that it is not among the rich, who are united by no common tie, but that it occupies the judicial bench and the bar.”⁹ The public at large learned how to exercise its own governing power, Tocqueville thought, chiefly through the discipline of service on juries.¹⁰

In roughly the period in which Tocqueville wrote, efforts commenced to give Americans formal schooling in how to govern their democracy. For the mass public, sponsors of public education such as Horace Mann, Noah Webster, and Benjamin Rush sought a curriculum that would, in Rush’s phrase, “convert men into republican machines.”¹¹ For the elites, this meant training in law. At the time, lawyers did not qualify to be lawyers through academic study. As in England, they served apprenticeships, not in centrally located Inns of Court but, as a rule, trailing after lawyers who followed judges roving their circuits. The transition from being an apprentice to being a lawyer lacked formality. As a distinguished Wisconsin lawyer explained,

“When one desired to be admitted to the bar in those days he got a lawyer to move the court to appoint a committee, and of course the court appointed the mover of the proposition and whoever the mover and the judge might select, and

then the duty of the applicant according to this tradition of the bar, was to invite this committee to a wine supperThe examination took place after supper.”¹²

Law schools were set up in association with colleges as, in effect, academic departments designed to give college students enough knowledge of law to understand what lawyers did.

Between 1850 and 1900, as the United States grew in population and became increasingly industrialized, the demand for public services of one type or another accelerated rapidly. The challenges first appeared at the municipal level. The rate of urbanization was high, and the escalating cost of basic services began to stress municipal budgets and distress the payers of property taxes. In addition, urban problems, such as public health (epidemics were epidemic), sanitation, street engineering, and public transportation, acquired increasingly technical dimensions. In this context, the need for trained and capable public servants – with something more than general intelligence – seemed more evident, even pressing. Indeed, one might see in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the emergence of the notion of public service as a profession – which, of course, accompanied the rise of the “professions” more generally and the proliferation of professional schools (and standards) in law, medicine, engineering, and even public health. It is in this period also that the notion of a “career” in public service begins to emerge.¹³

A concern for a competent and efficient public service fueled the creation of state civil service programs as well as Congressional passage of the Pendleton Act in 1883, creating a national civil service. Consequently, entrance into some public service occupations (the proportion of public jobs covered by the legislation varied over time) was determined by competitive examinations. The educational levels required for entrance were not high: the exams suggest that basic literacy and numeracy were key, as were a rudimentary knowledge of accounting and some constitutional history. Not surprisingly, then, the Pendleton Act and other similar reforms did not generate any significant developments in the educational arena, although some universities (particularly public universities) began to offer courses with an eye towards public service.¹⁴

New pressures also appeared on the international front as the United States became actively involved in global affairs. The profession of diplomacy escaped all professionalization until the beginning of the twentieth century, when Congress established examinations for entry into the consular corps, the controlling argument being that consuls had to be prepared to promote foreign trade. Diplomats as distinct from consuls did not begin to have to pass examinations until the mid-1920s, and then, as now, the higher diplomatic posts remained “spoils.” No particular educational background was ever required for consular or diplomatic service (though the Foreign Service exams were often accused of being tailored for Ivy League liberal arts graduates).¹⁵

It was, thus, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that a loosely defined field of “public administration” began to take shape. By then, the American system of government, likened by Tocqueville to an army in the field, and characterized by recent scholars as an assembly of “courts and parties,” had clearly become inadequate for coping with public needs.¹⁶ At every level, from the township up, Americans turned to the expedient of creating administrative agencies to take the place of courts in implementing legislation such as that on freight rates or zoning. Since this was somewhat imitative of practice in Roman law countries, since these new agencies were assuming functions previously performed by judges, and since the period was one in which formal law schooling became practically the only route into the legal profession, it would have seemed logical for law schools to make themselves the central vehicles for providing education at least for “public administration” and perhaps for public service more broadly.

Yet this did not occur: as William C. Chase explains in his elegant monograph, *The American Law School and the Rise of Administrative Government*, law schools failed to become explicit providers of education for public service because, just at this period in their history, teachers in law schools began to think of themselves as scientists, advancing a branch of basic knowledge, rather than as trainers of practitioners. In the Harvard Law School, Christopher Columbus Langdell advocated case-method teaching on the theory that close examination of judicial opinion permitted the discovery of eternal principles just as observation of nature permitted physicists to discover laws of nature. “If law be not a science,” Langdell declared, “a university will consult its own dignity in declining

to teach it.” In fact, he said, law was “one of the greatest and most difficult of the sciences.”¹⁷

Though the notion of law professors rooting out of Supreme Court reports the equivalent of a second law of thermodynamics proved to be short-lived, case-method teaching concentrated on judicial opinions came to dominate legal education, the new rationale being the ability thereby to teach, in the words of Langdell’s star pupil, James Barr Ames, “the power of solving legal problems.”¹⁸ Consequently, “administrative law” became a specialty in law schools (taught at Harvard by Felix Frankfurter), but it was not the kind of administrative law taught in Roman law countries. It was instead inquiry into the legal principles underpinning court decisions on the actions of administrative bodies. In choosing this path, law schools in the United States were effectively declining to offer education specifically for public service.

Other branches of the established universities also faltered in facing this challenge. At Columbia, Frank Goodnow attempted to create European-style study of administrative law, basing himself both in the law school and in a department of political science. But his undertaking failed, condemned from the law school side as not “strictly legal” and from the political science side as too “legalistic.”¹⁹ Harvard at the turn of the century considered creating a school of diplomacy and public service, but decided that there was little demand for such an education and founded the Business School instead.

Indeed, the first successful effort to develop training that would combine general administrative skills and knowledge (e.g. finance, accounting, personnel management), technical knowledge where relevant, and some knowledge of the social sciences came not at a university but at the Training School for Public Service, founded in 1911 by the New York Bureau of Municipal Research, itself founded in 1906. Funded largely by Mrs. E. H. Harriman and led by historian Charles Beard, the School sought to provide both academic and in-the-field training for those who would work in city governments. Its stated aims included “to train men for the study and administration of public business,” to qualify men “competent to test and improve” methods and results of municipal service, to engage in research, and to “furnish . . . a connecting link between schools and colleges and municipal or other public departments for practical field work”²⁰

The founding of the Training School for Public Service was followed by the first wave of creation of formal programs, based in universities, for the study of public administration and the education of men and women for public service. (The TSPS itself moved to Columbia University in 1931 while some of its programs went to the Maxwell School at Syracuse.) The demand for graduates of such programs was fueled by the expansion of government at all levels, by the growth of the executive branches of state governments, and, notably, by the spread of home-rule and city manager forms of municipal governance. The need for such programs at universities was pressed repeatedly by the American Political Science Association.²¹

Between 1914 and 1930, programs in public administration or municipal administration were created at several dozen institutions, including Michigan, UC Berkeley, Stanford, Syracuse, Cincinnati, USC, Minnesota, Columbia, Chicago, and the newly renamed Brookings Institution. The programs were generally small and varied in their curricula, but most tended to have a blend of the following elements:

- 1) the study of history, government, and public affairs, in a general, liberal arts context;
- 2) the more specialized study of a social science, e.g. sociology (a new field), political science, and economics;
- 3) the general study of administration, with a clinical component; and, in some cases, administrative training for specialized experts who sought to become more involved in policy (e.g. physicians, engineers, agronomists, or teachers). The study of public administration per se was developed with particular strength at the Maxwell School at Syracuse under the guidance of its pioneering dean, William Mosher.²²

Not surprisingly, the Great Depression and the New Deal spawned the next major surge in educational programs for governance and public service. Between 1933 and 1941, programs were created in more than two dozen universities, including major

national institutions such as Harvard and Yale. At such institutions (and to some degree elsewhere as well), the programs were designed expressly to train people for service in the national government: the 1930s, in effect, witnessed the nationalization of the impulses that had centered on municipal and state issues during earlier decades. One symbolic indicator of this shift was the creation of the National Institute for Public Affairs, which provided nine-month training internships in federal offices in Washington. Not surprisingly, the programs of the 1930s placed more emphasis on subject matters (such as economics and social policy) that appeared to be the domain and concern of national policy. At the same time, law schools began to pay greater attention to administrative law, while the ties between the social sciences and public administration deepened, symbolized by the Social Science Research Council's creation of a committee on public administration in 1934. The government Reorganization Act of 1939 also prompted (and reflected) new thinking about the nature of large organizations.²³

According to a study conducted under the auspices of the SSRC and published in 1941, the content of the programs of the 1930s tended to vary in several respects: a) the degree to which there was coursework in addition to clinical or field experience; b) the degree to which they stressed public administration per se as a field rather than the social science disciplines (the Maxwell School at Syracuse put the greatest stress on administration); and c) precisely where they were housed within universities (as separate schools, as programs linking courses in various departments, as parts of political science departments, or even as programs within business schools, as at Wharton).²⁴

World War II – despite its immense challenges – does not seem to have prompted any immediate changes in education for public service. After all, most of the potential students were in uniform, and urgent matters at hand took precedence over curricular innovation. Notably, however, the war drew large numbers of academics, particularly from the social sciences, into government service – in both policy and administrative positions. (This wartime migration was even larger than it had been during the New Deal: one analyst referred to it as the largest program in postdoctoral education for faculty in the nation’s history.) As a result, universities, after the war, contained numerous academics who had returned to university life having gained years of hands-on experience in public service and governance. The war also had the effect of introducing large numbers of lawyers to public management problems that few had previously encountered, as, for example, in allocating scarce materials, regulating prices and wages, or establishing civil administration in liberated or occupied areas abroad.²⁵

The postwar period, however, saw some tumult in the educational arena. On the one hand, the experiences of many academics led to a new pragmatism in teaching that included a growing pedagogical focus on case studies. (An inter-university consortium on case studies was launched in 1948.) On the other hand, social scientists (particularly political scientists) began to question many of the intellectual presumptions of the field of “public administration” – and indeed to question whether there was such a field. Could “administration” really be separated from “policy” as many had claimed during the interwar years? Could public administration be studied without respect to a theoretically sound and sophisticated understanding of human behavior on the one hand and political

contexts on the other? If there was no distinctive field of public administration, then what should prospective public servants study – political science, decision theory, or what? Institutions training students for public governance stopped proliferating and began either reaching out more to the social sciences or hunkering down to protect themselves from social science criticism. At the same time, American dominance in the postwar world, coupled with the Cold War, led to a new emphasis on knowledge of world affairs.²⁶

By the 1960s and early 1970s, these intellectual tensions had contributed to a redefinition of the educational field – from “public administration” to “public policy.” At the heart of this shift was a growing faith in the power and prestige of economics as a field, a method, and even as a science. In addition to the apparent triumph of macro-economists over the vagaries of the business cycle, economists, heavily dependent on tools developed by mathematicians, also appeared to have come up with solutions for the awful intellectual problem of how to manage international relations in an era of nuclear plenty. In and around Robert McNamara’s Department of Defense, economists put into practice techniques of program analysis and benefit-cost measurement, which President Johnson then forced on all domestic departments involved in building his “Great Society.” (One scholar tells of visiting the office of a cabinet secretary in order to explain to him a several-hundred-page booklet on Policy Planning Budget Systems, one of the hallmark techniques of the era. He came upon the Secretary fingering the booklet and asking “What is this piece of shit?” He had the pleasure of responding, “That piece of shit, sir, is what the President of the United States has directed that you introduce into

your department.”) Harvard’s Kennedy School came into being at precisely the period when the key to preparation for public service seemed to be mastery of the principles and techniques of economic analysis; and the Kennedy School was hardly alone in sprinting down this path.

Yet the Vietnam War took some of the luster off the accomplishments of McNamara and his “whiz kids,” while the apparent failure of many Great Society policies also cast doubt on the power of the new techniques of policy analysis. Indeed, the Nixon administration and most of its successors paid much less attention to economists or economic analysis than had the Democratic administrations of the 1960s. Rather quickly, the new shibboleth in education for public service became “public management” which promised to train students to implement as well as select policies. Programs at Wharton, the Stanford Business School, and Yale accordingly placed less emphasis on economics than had (or did) the Kennedy School. Yet promising as this new approach seemed to be, “public management” proved to be as hard to define and teach as had the subject of “public administration” several decades earlier.²⁷

This brief historical sketch – brought to a merciful close even before scanning the more familiar vicissitudes of the last two decades – makes clear that education for public service has not evolved in any simple or uni-directional way over the last two centuries. Public service itself has changed along many different axes, as have common values and ideas about economies, societies, and political institutions: educational programs for public servants have reflected all of those changes, sometimes after a substantial lag time.

The certainties of one decade have rarely seemed so certain two or three decades later. The tools that seemed appropriate to face one era's challenges often appeared clumsy not long thereafter. On occasion, a long forgotten wheel has been reinvented to great applause.

This history also makes one other fact quite visible: throughout American history, most public servants have not been trained expressly for public service. The scale of programs for education for public service has always been small in relation to the total number of persons working for municipal, state, and federal governments. Whether this has had a deleterious effect on the conduct of public business is impossible to determine. It is, however, consistent with the values of a nation that has embraced the notion that true power lies with the people as a whole and that consequently the most important education for public service comes through civics courses in public schools and through popular participation in politics.

¹ Frederick C. Mosher, *Democracy and the Public Service* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 2d edition, pp. 29-40.

² Herman Finer, *The British Civil Service* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1937). The quotation from Macaulay is from *ibid.*, TK.

³ Carl J. Richards, *The Founders and the Classics: Greece, Rome, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 233.

⁴ Gordon Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969), p. 606. See also his later book, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992) and, for a

later dating of the classics' loss of persuasive power, Joyce O. Appleby, *Liberalism and Republicanism in the Historical Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1002) and Edwin A.; Miles, "The Young American Nation and the Classical World," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 35 (April-June 1974).

⁵ Mosher, *Democracy and the Public Service*, pp. 41-7; Paul P. Van Riper, *History of the United States Civil Service* (Westport, CT.: Greenwood Press, 1976), pp. 11-52.

⁶ See Leonard White, *The Jacksonians: A Study in Administrative History, 1829-1861* (New York: Macmillan, 1954), pp. 552-567; Van Riper, *The History of the United States Civil Service*, p. 36.

⁷ Allan R. Millett and Peter Maslowski, *For the Common Defense: A Military History of the United States* (New York: The Free Press, 1984), pp. 99-100, 129.

⁸ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (The Henry Reeve text as revised by Francis Bowen; New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945), pp. 219-220.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 288.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 296.

¹¹ Benjamin Rush, "Thoughts upon the Mode of Education Proper in a Republic," quoted in William R. Johnson, *Schooled Lawyers: A Study in the Clash of Professional Cultures* (New York: New York University Press, 1978), p. 7.

¹² James G. Jenkins, speaking in 1906, quoted in William R. Johnson, *Schooled Lawyers: A Study in the Clash of Professional Cultures* (New York: New York University Press, 1978), p. 26.

¹³ Alice B. Stone and Donald C. Stone, “Early Development of Education in Public Administration,” in Frederick C. Mosher, ed., *American Public Administration: Past, Present, Future* (n.p.: University of Alabama Press, 1975), pp. 17-25.

¹⁴ Van Riper, *History of the United States Civil Service*, pp. 96-168; Stone and Stone, fn. 13, “Early Development,” p. 25

¹⁵ Warren F. Ilchman, *Professional Diplomacy in the United States, 1779-1939: A Study in Administrative History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961).

¹⁶ See Stephen Skowronek, *Building a New American State: The Expansion of National Administrative Capacities* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

¹⁷ William C. Chase, *The American Law School and the Rise of Administrative Government* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), p. 29.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 48-49.

²⁰ Stone and Stone, fn. 13, “Early Development,” pp. 28-9; quotation from the Bureau of Municipal Research, *Training School for Public Service, Announcement-1911* (New York, 1911), p. 2.

²¹ Stone and Stone, fn. 13, “Early Development,” pp. 26-32.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 26-32.

²³ Rowland Egger, “The Period of Crisis,” in Frederick C. Mosher, ed., *American Public Administration, Past, Present, Future* (n.p.: University of Alabama Press, 1975), pp. 49-96; a comprehensive survey of the developments of the 1930s is presented in George A. Graham, *Education for Public Administration: Graduate Preparation in the Social Sciences at American Universities* (Chicago: R.R. Donnelly and Co., 1941). See

also United States Department of the Interior, Office of Education, *Training for the Public Service Occupations 1937*, Vocational Education Bulletin, No. 192 (Washington: GPO, 1938).

²⁴ George A. Graham, *Education for Public Administration*, fn. 23, pp. 135-317.

²⁵ Rawloand Egger, fn. 23, pp. 83-92.

²⁶ James W. Fesler, "Public Administration and the Social Sciences: 1946-1960," in Frederick C. Mosher, ed., *American Public Administration: Past, Present, Future* (n.p.: Univerity of Alabama Press, 1975), pp. 97-125.

²⁷ On the 1960s and 1970s (and thereafter), see Donald E. Stokes, "The Changing Environment of Education for Public Service," *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 15, no. 2, 158-170 (1996).